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WASHINGTON, DC – Human rights and religious freedom must be a priority when high-level talks take place between the Chinese government and the Obama Administration in Washington July 27-28, said the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), a bipartisan watchdog panel monitoring religious freedom abroad.

“This is an opportunity for the Obama Administration to clearly indicate that human rights is an essential part of every bilateral interest,” said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair. “China will only take human rights concerns seriously when they are discussed at the highest levels and in tandem with other strategic interests. The United States should resist the temptation of pushing human rights discussions into a separate dialogue, a tactic that in the past has been unproductive.”

The U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue will take place in Washington DC. President Obama and Chinese President Hu Jintao agreed to resume a senior level dialogue in April 2009 to deal with a wide range of economic issues and ongoing strategic concerns including North Korea, Sudan, Iran, counterterrorism, and law enforcement. The resumption of a human rights dialogue was part of renewed high-level discussions.

Currently, China holds more than 20 human rights exchanges with foreign countries. Few, if any, of these dialogues have proved productive. Increasingly, bilateral human rights dialogues isolated from larger strategic and economic discussions have become “talk shops” where each side defends its own record while attacking the rights record of the other side. In addition, China uses its diplomatic muscle to discourage human rights coordination among countries.

Discussion of China’s human rights record is timely. The past year saw Chinese security forces respond with overwhelming force to public protests in Tibetan and Uighur areas of China and there was a significant rise in the number of arrests for “endangering state security” and among unregistered or “illegal” religious groups. In addition, at its February, 2009 UN Universal Periodic Human Rights Review, China defended its expansive use of administrative detention and strict punishment of human rights defenders and flatly rebuffed calls to fulfill international commitments to freedoms of expression, assembly, and religion.

“The Chinese government’s continuing crackdown on China’s ethnic and religious minorities and heightened repression of unregistered religious groups and human rights defenders, as well as the thousands of prisoners languishing in detention centers and prisons for peacefully expressing religious or political views indicate a level of state control over society that is incompatible with the development of the rule of law, an independent judiciary, good governance, and the free flow of information,” said Mr. Leo. “As such, human rights, including religious freedom, must be fully integrated with other U.S. economic and strategic interests with

China.”

USCIRF recommendations for President Obama on China’s human rights:

- Seek independent and transparent investigations of protests, violence, and detentions in Tibetan and Uighur areas, including full accounts of those killed, injured, and detained;
- Urge China to unconditionally release thousands of Uighurs, Tibetans, unregistered Protestants and Catholics, Falun Gong, and human rights defenders detained for peaceful expression of their political or religious views or human rights advocacy;
- Urge the creation of a mechanism for reviewing cases of persons, including religious individuals, detained under suspicion of, or charged with, offenses relating to endangering state security, disturbing social order, religious extremism, counterrevolutionary and cult activities, or for organizing or participating in “illegal” religious gatherings;
- Urge China to accept the expansion of non-commercial rule of law programs focusing on the compatibility of Chinese national and provincial laws, ordinances, and decrees with international standards of the freedom of religion, expression, association, and the right to a fair trial and legal counsel;
- Urge the immediate end to the repatriation of North Korea asylum-seekers in China and urge China to fulfill its international obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention and Article 3 of the Convention Against Torture; and,
- Reconvene the “Bern Process” in order to coordinate programs and diplomacy between countries with human rights dialogues with China.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF’s principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

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